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Counterdeception and the Operational Commander

by

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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15.Abstract: **Military Deception has been a component of warfare throughout history, and evidence shows that it is usually successful, despite the best efforts of the target to detect the intentions and capabilities of the deceiver. Such notable military thinkers as Sun Tzu and Clausewitz have written about the merits of deception, indicating that when applied successfully, it can enable smaller, weaker forces to master larger, stronger forces. Analysis of historical cases proves that the most successful deceptions are those keyed to the existing perceptions of the target, normally the opposing commander, and this fact is documented in current U.S. doctrine governing the conduct of deception operations.**

Because deception is employed so frequently, particularly as a tool to "even the odds" when opposing forces are unevenly matched, and because commanders are the logical targets of such activities since they alone have the ability to make the decisions and take the action desired by their opponents, U.S. operational commanders should be prepared to encounter deception targeting them personally. The commander's defense against enemy deception efforts, particularly the unmasking of deception, requires much more than merely gathering and analyzing intelligence.

To effectively develop a concept for counterdeception, a topic given little attention in current U.S. military doctrine, one must examine the nature of human belief systems and psychology. Counterdeception is as much a function of the commander's ability to view the operational situation from the enemy's perspective, without being unduly influenced by his own beliefs, as it is a function of the intelligence community's ability to collect and distill the appropriate data.

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Counterdeception and the Operational Commander

Introduction. Military deception, defined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as "… those actions executed to deliberately mislead adversary military decision makers as to friendly military capabilities, intentions, and operations, thereby causing the adversary to take specific actions (or inactions) that will contribute to the accomplishment of the friendly mission",[1] is an accepted practice in war and has a proven track record of success throughout history. A relatively low-cost activity compared to other military operations, deception can improve one's own combat effectiveness and cause the enemy to waste his resources.[2] Current U.S. military doctrine includes deception operations as a component of command and control warfare, and recognizes and documents its value to commanders at all levels. Deception planning is in fact mandated as "… an integral part of the joint planning process."[3]

Because the evidence shows that military deception almost always succeeds,[4] it is no wonder that it has been studied and written about in detail. Historical cases of deception operations and their success, and sometimes their failure, have been examined extensively, and from those cases conclusions have been drawn that guide current U.S. military thinking on the subject. Despite the breadth of available material on deception, however,

little has been written about how commanders should protect themselves and their forces from falling victim to the effects of enemy deception operations. Though the term *counterdeception*, as defined in Joint Pub 1-02, is not an exact match, it shall be used here to refer to this idea. Oddly, Joint Pub 1-02 specifically excludes the identification of foreign deception as a component of counterdeception, considering it instead to be an intelligence function.[5] As shall be shown, the accurate assessment of enemy deceptive activity is very much a part of counterdeception, and while intelligence is important to that effort, the ability of the operational commander to unmask the deception is equally dependent upon other, more personal, factors.

This paper, which focuses on the psychological aspects of deception/counterdeception at the operational level of warfare, will look first at deception itself and examine why it succeeds and under what circumstances it may not. Considering the psychology of the human belief system, a concept will be formulated for counterdeception and how it may be used to benefit operational commanders.

The Value of Deception. During World War II the allies conducted elaborate deception operations to mislead Hitler about their plans for the invasion at Normandy. This famous deception, code-

named FORTITUDE, comprised multiple operations designed to fool Hitler as to the time and place of the allied invasion. The allies employed a variety of techniques to accomplish the deception, including the use of actors to impersonate well known military commanders, small boats and aircraft to simulate larger forces, extensive misleading communications signals, decoys, sham attacks at false locations, and double agents.[6] The result was that despite having knowledge that the allies were to invade France, Hitler thought they would do so at Pas-de-Calais instead of Normandy, on a date later than they actually did, and he accordingly positioned his forces in the wrong place to effectively counter the invasion. Arguably, success on D-Day would not have been achieved without deception.

The Normandy example is but one of dozens of deceptions used by both sides during World War II. In warfare throughout history commanders have planned and executed deceptions in order to mislead enemy commanders as to the timing or location of attacks, the strengths and capabilities of friendly forces, main versus supporting objectives, and friendly intentions in general. During Operation DESERT STORM the coalition conducted a deception operation that caused Saddam Hussein to orient his forces in the wrong direction, convinced that the attack would come from the gulf, rather than from Saudi Arabia where it actually originated. Of 232 historical cases studied in which military surprise was

desired, surprise was in fact achieved 93 percent of the time when deception was employed, compared to only 30 percent when deception was not used.[7]

It is apparent, then, that deception will, more often than not, benefit the deceiver. It may even be said that, given the opportunity, *not* making use of this potentially rewarding activity is akin to subverting one's capabilities.[8] What may be less obvious is that deception is most frequently a tool of the weak against the strong, used to "even the odds", so to speak. Clausewitz, who did not address deception at length, said "The weaker the forces at the disposal of the supreme commander, the more appealing the use of cunning becomes".[9] And in the words of Michael Handel, noted expert on the subject of deception, "If opponents are unequally matched, deception (and surprise) can enable the weaker side to compensate for its numerical or other inadequacies. For this reason, the side that is at a disadvantage often has a more powerful incentive to resort to deceptive strategy and tactics."[10]

The combination of these two concepts, that deception usually works and that a weak opponent may be likely to use it to compensate for military shortcomings, should serve as a warning to military leaders in the United States. They should expect their opponents to attempt to deceive them, and they should

prepare themselves accordingly. Unfortunately, though there is little doubt that the value of deception is understood by the U.S. military, the lesson learned seems to be oriented almost exclusively on how friendly forces can use deception to their advantage, with scant attention to the dangers of being deceived by an enemy. As of this writing the database of Joint Universal Lessons Learned (JULLs), an electronic repository of documented lessons from major exercises and operations conducted by all services, contains no references to counterdeception in any form, despite numerous comments as to the merit and method of deception itself as a force multiplier for both friendly and opposing forces.

The Nature of Deception. Sun Tzu's often quoted statement that "All warfare is based on deception"[11] lays the foundation for his later comment "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles".[12] It is clear that 2500 years ago Sun Tzu understood the importance of deception, and that he also understood its nature, that is, why it works. The enemy decision maker is necessarily the target of deception operations because he is the one who can take the action desired by the deceiver[13], and one must in turn know his enemy in order to effectively deceive him. It is important to see the world through the eyes of the opponent, to "… think like the adversary,"[14] so as to gain a solid grasp of his perceptions[15],

which in turn allows for the development of an operation that reinforces his expectations and masks the true intent or capability.

To be effective, a deception must be believable. And as stated by deception researchers Daniel and Herbig, "Critical to believability … are the target's perceptual and organizational processes".[16] They argue that people develop a "mind set", based on their experiences and training, which affects the way in which they perceive situations, and thus the deceiver must craft his deception carefully to be believable within the opponent's mind set. The deceiver must also take into account the group viewpoint of the opponent's intelligence gathering and analyzing organizations, which are "likely to have certain norms and assumptions about what things mean or portend"[17]. It is clear, just as implied by Sun Tzu, that the more one knows about his opponent (and his opponent's organization) the better his chances for developing an effective deception.

Deception Success and Failure. Not all attempted deceptions have been successful, and a look at deception success and failure may serve to help form a basis for the development of a concept for counterdeception. Notable examples of success, as reviewed previously, include the Normandy invasion and the coalition attack in DESERT STORM. In each of these cases, as in others

where success was achieved, the enemy leader was provided false information, through a variety of sources, that led him to reach a conclusion that fit his perception of what would likely happen. The sources of the false information were multiple and varied, in order to offer seemingly independent confirmation of the "facts", and the information itself was believable, as it not only matched the enemy's expectations, but foretold of coming events that were actually possible, given friendly forces and capabilities. In both of these cases, deception planners focused their efforts on the perceptions of their target - a practice employed in the great majority (84 percent) of historical deceptions studied by the U.S. Army.[18]

Deceptions that failed include Operation STARKEY, executed by the allies in 1943 to convince Hitler that a cross-channel invasion of France was to take place in September of that year, with the desire of pinning down German forces in Northwest France to prevent them from being sent to either the Eastern Front or Italy. This deception was a dismal failure because it did not target existing perceptions of Hitler (evidence indicates that the Germans did not even consider the possibility of a cross-channel invasion as early as 1943), and the story itself was neither feasible, given existing allied resources at the time, nor operationally believable, as it was not realistically consistent with other ongoing allied efforts.[19]

Another example of a failed deception was ALBION, a German operation designed to convince the British that the Southeast coast of England was to be invaded in the spring of 1941, to cover the mobilization and movement of German forces to the East in preparation for the invasion of Russia. The two most significant reasons for the failure of ALBION, which appear common to operational-level deception failures, were an unrealistic perception by Hitler concerning British vulnerabilities, and the use of insufficient resources, which rendered the deception unbelievable.[20]

From these brief examples, which are representative of many others, one may conclude that the perceptions of deceiver and deceived are critical to the success or failure of deception operations, as is the use of sufficient and proper resources to make the story feasible and believable. In fact, if one considers that the resources used in a deception, including actual military forces, are merely props that make the story credible, to enable the perceptions of the deceived to be more effectively manipulated, one may reason that above all else, perception is the key to deception. Stated another way, a deception can only be believable within the constraints of the target's perceptions, thus the focus of counterdeception efforts must necessarily be the perceptions of the friendly commander.

Psychology and Perception. Humans develop beliefs, the precursors of their perceptions, based upon what they have experienced.[21] Whereas most beliefs are "… abstractions or generalizations from several experiences over time,"[22] they rest ultimately "… on the credibility of one's own sensory experience or upon a basic belief in the credibility of some external authority."[23] How a commander perceives the world must in large measure therefore be a factor of his personal experiences, which would certainly include those of military and cultural origin, among others, or based upon information provided to him from what he considers to be authoritative sources. The latter may include published material (military journals or newspapers, for example), the conclusions of established experts, such as intelligence professionals, and especially the word of recognized teachers, trainers, and leaders who may be viewed as duly constituted authorities due to their access to information and power.[24]

His experiences also shape the commander's ability to listen, creating psychological "deaf spots" that impair his ability to perceive and understand what is being said.[25] For one who must make critical military decisions based on what he is told about the mission, enemy and friendly forces, and myriad other factors, this shortcoming is potentially dangerous. Further, since "…

people test the accuracy of their opinions by comparing them with the opinions of others,"[26] the ability to listen effectively to others is important at the basic level of beliefs and perceptions. Psychologist Robert Cialdini, who conducted extensive research concerning why and how humans may be influenced by others, noted that a need for *consistency* affects one's ability to see things as they really are. In other words, once one makes a decision about what he believes, and especially if he has made his decision known to others, he subconsciously strives to remain consistent with that belief in his subsequent decisions and actions.[27] It is difficult, therefore, to change an existing belief, and commanders should be alert to that fact.

This cursory review of human beliefs, which in turn affects how people perceive the world, is relevant to the development of a concept for counterdeception, as shall be presented below. It would seem that additional research in this area might give rise to a better understanding of human nature in general, and oneself and one's opponent in particular, in true Sun Tzuian fashion.

What Counterdeception is Not. Before postulating a concept for counterdeception, it might be appropriate to examine what it is not. Some may argue that counterdeception is nothing more than a subset of counterintelligence or operations security. After all, both of those military disciplines are concerned with denying

information to the enemy, and both are necessarily linked to deception operations, thus it should follow that somewhere between the two counterdeception must be adequately covered in military doctrine or literature. To the contrary, counterdeception is unlike counterintelligence, operations security, or even deception itself. Counterdeception is not intended to deny information to the enemy, but rather to prevent inappropriate friendly actions based on receipt of enemy information. Unlike deception, it seeks not to mislead the enemy, but to recognize enemy attempts to mislead friendly decision makers.

By lumping counterdeception in the same category with either counterintelligence or operations security, one dilutes its significance and runs the risk of ignoring its implications, thereby exposing friendly forces to possible harm that may have been avoided. The focus of counterdeception at the operational level is the operational commander, and it is he or she who should remain personally attuned to its potential strengths and weaknesses. As the deception target, only the commander can make the decisions, based on enemy activity and available intelligence, that the enemy desires; conversely, as a successful practitioner of counterdeception only the commander can refuse to take such action. No other military discipline is so directly linked to operational leadership.

A Concept for Counterdeception. In theory, to effectively avoid falling prey to enemy deception efforts, a commander must accurately identify the enemy operation as deceptive, and avoid taking the action his opponent desires him to take. Making the huge assumption that the information provided to him is accurate (which is a different research topic entirely), the issue for this paper is not the information itself, or the information sources, but rather how the commander uses it to detect deception. Mere possession of accurate information is not enough, as evidenced by the results of 93 cases studied by researchers Sherwin and Whaley. There was a high probability that in 78 percent of those cases the target received one or more warnings about an impending attack, yet was still surprised 93 percent of the time.[28] It is obviously difficult to avoid being deceived, and it may even be argued that the advantage lies with the deceiver because he knows the truth, whereas the target must search for its indicators (which the deceiver will happily supply, to suit his own purposes).[29]

Looking back at the ground rules for successful deception, it is clear that enemy deception attempts will most likely target the perceptions of the commander. His own perceptions, which spring from his beliefs, should therefore be examined closely by the commander who wishes to see the target from the enemy point of

view. In this regard, he must remain open minded, for the more open minded he is, the better able he will be to discern relevant information and act in accordance with the actual requirements of the situation, as opposed to one who is closed minded and may factor irrelevant issues (such as a dislike of the informant) into his analysis, causing him to react in a manner desired by external forces.[30] Unfortunately, this is not so easy as it may appear, because historical evidence would lead one to conclude that "to be closed minded is human."[31] A basic willingness to question one's own "cherished expectations" is key, for those are also one's greatest vulnerabilities.[32]

The commander should ask himself, a la Koffka, "Why do things look as they do?"[33] This seemingly simple question gets at the heart of both the commander's perceptions and the enemy's actions. Do things look as they do, for example, because the commander expects them to look that way? According to Richards Heuer, this is a natural human tendency.[34] Because the enemy may have developed his deception to take advantage of that very fact, the friendly commander should be advised to "… be wary of information which falls too neatly into a single pattern that seems to exclude other, no less reasonable possible courses of action…"[35]

Since the commander is likely to evaluate the information presented to him against the hypotheses grounded in his beliefs[36], he would be well advised to involve others into the process of counterdeception, perhaps his intelligence organization or subordinate leaders, to help him construct a range of possible explanations for the evidence at hand. The value of this technique is that these "devil's advocates" may render analysis based on entirely different, though possibly valid, hypotheses that are founded on different belief systems. The commander should be cautioned, however, that intelligence organizations may themselves be particularly vulnerable to deception or self-deception, because they generally try to fit the evidence to their theories, instead of the other way around, and because they have a preference for quantifiable data that can objectively confirm, rather than disprove, their previously developed explanations.[37]

Another technique a shrewd commander might employ involves placing himself in the shoes of the enemy, and devising possible courses of actions, both deceptive and non-deceptive, from that perspective, targeting himself, in other words.[38] One might even suspect that what may appear to be the enemy's most likely course of action, based upon one's own perceptions, may in fact be the most likely candidate for enemy deceptive operations. In the same vein, Handel warns that "… the more perfectly the

intelligence puzzle fits together, the greater the danger of a possible deception ploy."[39]

Conclusions. The use of deception in war will likely remain a viable strategy in the foreseeable future, due to its record of success throughout history and potential benefit, with correspondingly small cost to the deceiver. U.S. military leaders, in particular, should be attuned to the likelihood that they will be targeted by the enemy, for two reasons: 1) leaders are normally the focus of deceptive efforts, as they are the ones who can make the decisions and take the actions desired by the deceiver, and 2) deception is often a tool of the weak, who seek to improve their position in relation to the strong, e.g., the United States.

To effectively counter deception attempts, commanders must first identify the enemy activities as deceptive. Because such activities will most often be designed to reinforce their existing perceptions, commanders need to understand their own beliefs and expectations, and how they might be exploited by an astute enemy. By expecting to be deceived, remaining open minded, employing advisors with different beliefs and expectations to help him see alternative explanations for enemy activity, and viewing things from the enemy perspective, the

commander may be able to avoid becoming a victim of even a well planned deception.

NOTES

[1] The Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Military Deception, Joint Pub 3-58, (Washington: 1996), I-1.

[2] Department of the Army, Battlefield Deception, FM 90-2, (Washington: 1988), 1-0.

[3] Joint Pub 3-58, vii.

[4] Janice Gross Stein, "Military Deception, Strategic Surprise and Conventional Deterrence: A Political Analysis of Egypt and Israel, 1971-73", The Journal of Strategic Studies, March 1982, 95.

[5] Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, Joint Pub 1-02, (Washington: 1994), 101.

[6] Barton Whaley, Stratagem: Deception and Surprise in War, Vol. II (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1969), A-374 - A382.

[7] FM 90-2, 1-5.

[8] Michael I. Handel, Military Deception in Peace and War, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1985), 7.

[9] Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 203.

[10] Handel, 7-8.

[11] Sun Tzu, The Art of War, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 11.

[12] Ibid., 18.

[13] Joint Pub 3-58, A-1.

[14] Handel, 26.

[15] Ibid., 27.

[16] Donald C. Daniel and Katherine L. Herbig, ed., Strategic Military Deception (New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 357.

[17] Ibid., 358.

[18] FM 90-2, 1-5.

[19] Michael I. Handel, ed., Strategic and Operational Deception in the Second World War (London: Frank Cass & Co., Ltd., 1987), 45-47.

[20] FM 90-2, 1-18 - 1-19.

[21] Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen, Belief, Attitude, Intention, and Behavior: An Introduction to Theory and Research (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1975), 143.

[22] Daryl J. Bem, Beliefs, Attitudes and Human Affairs (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., 1970), 7.

[23] Ibid., 5.

[24] Robert B. Cialdini, Influence: The Power of Persuasion (New York: William Morrow, 1984), 218.

[25] Earnest Parker Mills, Listening: Key to Communication (New York: Petrocelli Books, 1974), 75.

[26] Fishbein and Ajzen, 165.

[27] Cialdini, 57.

[28] Daniel and Herbig, 363.

[29] Ibid., 359.

[30] Milton Rokeach, The Open and Closed Mind; Investigations Into the Nature of Belief Systems and Personality Systems (New York: Basic Books, 1960), 58.

[31] Handel, Military Deception in Peace and War, 31.

[32] Daniel and Herbig, 364.

[33] Floyd H. Allport, Theories of Perception and the Concept of Structure (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1955), 15.

[34] Richards Heuer, quoted in Daniel and Herbig, 34.

[35] Handel, Military Deception in Peace and War, 30.

[36] Daniel and Herbig, 362.

[37] Earnest R. May, ed., Knowing One's Enemies (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 537-538.

[38] Daniel and Herbig, 363.

[39] Handel, Military Deception in Peace and War, 38.

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